

Ensign 101

Written by Captain James P. Ransom
Wednesday, 16 June 2010 12:24

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Adapted from "Ensign 101," an article written by Captain James P. Ransom in the February 1995 issue of Naval Institute Proceedings.

My bride and I have had the great pride and pleasure of seeing each of our three sons graduate from a sea service Academy - two from Navy, one from Coast Guard. On the occasion of each commissioning, I presented the new ensign with a stack of 3' x 5' cards which, while not meant to displace the captain's standing orders in reading-list priority, had the modest attribute of containing in, in abbreviated form, all of the world's accumulated wisdom - or at least the seagoing world's.

There is a tilt toward submarining in the guidance, because that was my warfare specialty - heck, it was my life - for some years. But there should be something here for any serviceman or woman, perhaps even for civilians. It's free advice and worth every penny.

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You can't do it all. You will always have more tasking, more potential work than you can complete without killing yourself or your people. The successful officer is not the workaholic, but the fellow who is sufficiently perceptive to recognize priorities and ensure that the things that don't get done, after he's completed an honest day's work, don't make any difference.

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When you've completed that reasonable day's work, go home. Don't sit around the boat just because other people or your boss are still working. Don't sit around waiting to be tasked. You'll have plenty of genuine opportunity to prove your dedication.

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Problems are almost always underestimated initially. Get your arms around a problem as soon as possible and work your way in until you are sure you know its scope.

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Attack problems and situations, not people.

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You can get yourself in more trouble through inaction than through action. Doing something is almost always better than doing nothing. Your first ideas are more than likely right at least in general direction if not in detail.

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A task repeatedly put on the back burner will never get done. Scan the back burner occasionally. (Usually you can throw most of the stuff out, but you may recover a "must do")

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In the wonderful world of administration, don't demand 4.0 when something less will get the job done.

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Get ahead on qualifications -- and stay ahead.

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Learn to trust your instincts. If something doesn't feel quite right, it probably isn't.

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Make your orders as simple and concise as possible -- bottom line, not through processes. And make sure they are understood.

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Time estimates for job completion are invariably optimistic. Consider the impact of double the estimate. Triple.

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Tell your boss the bad news just as quickly as the good news. He is going to hear it sooner or later -- far better he should hear it from you than from his boss.

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Nothing is sailor-proof. Any interlock can be defeated.

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The worst disfavor you can do your boss is to tell him 'Yes, sir,' when the answer ought to be 'No.'

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If you ask your boss for advice, it is awfully hard not to follow it.

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When you tell your boss about a problem or situation requiring action, give him your intended solution or recommended course of action, especially if you are the officer of the deck waking up the captain in the middle of the night.

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Be direct, forthright, precise, and concise. Don't equivocate, dissemble, or obfuscate. Never lie. If you're not sure, say so. Don't be afraid not to know something.

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Don't be overly defensive. You can often defuse an attack simply by stating that you (singularly or collectively) screwed up, recognize how to do it right, and are now doing just that.

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Don't spend a silver bullet when an ordinary lead bullet will do. Save your silver bullets, blue chips and trump cards for when you really need them.

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G.O.Y.A. (Get Off Your A**) You will learn more poking around the spaces than you will sitting in the wardroom reading the reactor plant manual. Walk your spaces, and talk to each of your

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people, every day.

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For you, and for your people, there will be times when a personal situation should take priority over business. Take care of yourself and your people in this regards and they will give you extra effort.

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Just because you have "fixed" something, don't assume it's going to stay fixed. Spot check. Unchecked, things tend to degenerate.

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The key to ship handling is to anticipate and account for inertia. Rate of change is no less important than absolute value (There may be some application of this maxim outside of ship handling).

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Be sharp tactically. Most nuclear-trained junior officers are not. Act smartly -- something as simple as starting to back away from the pier exactly at the scheduled underway time -- and you will stand out as a water-walker.

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Pay attention to preventive maintenance. PMS not done can kill you.

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Two things of prime importance to a sailor are his pay and his performance marks. Nothing will depress his morale or raise his angry dissatisfaction more quickly than if he thinks somebody's diddling with either.

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Learn to operate your fire-control system. It is well worth investing some time with a technical expert and an experienced officer (usually not the same person).

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Make your chiefs and leading petty officers do the paperwork. If you don't press it, they will be delighted to leave it all to you.

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Don't talk business at wardroom meals, unless your boss forces it, in which case get off the subject as soon as possible. Keep the wardroom sociable and enjoyable.

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Leave the ship at the pier when you go to a party. Otherwise you'll become known as a social bore -- especially to your spouse.

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Don't burden your spouse with details about your job, but do talk about what's going on on the boat -- who got qualified, who got orders where.

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Keep your appearance, fitness, and health up. They are easy things to let go, and become apparent quickly.

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You can't stop a sailor from swearing, but by your own language and by telling him when necessary, you can suppress the routine use of the ubiquitous "f-word."

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Keep your personal space clean and uncluttered. Don't let stuff pile up -- on your bunk, your desk. It looks like a mess, things will get lost, and one good roll or down angle and it's all over the place.

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Don't eat every meal offered in the wardroom. You'll double your weight in one six-month deployment.

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As an officer of the deck or an engineering officer of the watch, you are, among other things, a safety valve. Keep your antennae scanning, lest something outflank your acquisition cone.

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Get to know your people and -- without intruding into their personal affairs -- their capabilities, goals, and problems. Be genuinely interested, and show it.

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You are not indispensable. Take some leave now and then. It recharges you, gives your shipmates a break, and does wonders for your marriage.

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Use "dead time" on watch to teach your team their own and other watch station jobs. Develop a watch section team spirit.

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Try to cut your people in on the rationale for and importance of what they are doing. This is not necessary to job completion (and in a short-fused situation, not practicable), but it will give you a better product in the end and fuller, more willing compliance in the future.

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You can get entranced tending the exotic garden flowers and wind up choked by the grass you didn't cut. In other words, make sure the routine stuff is getting done, too.

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When all else fails, apply two tests to a complex issues: What makes sense? What is right?

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Remember birthdays, anniversaries, Valentine's Day, Mother's Day (and to be equitable and to avoid litigation, I should add Father's Day)

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You are a naval or Coast Guard officer first, a submariner or skimmer second, and a nuke third

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Never underestimate the sea.

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Don't take yourself too seriously.